Letter 404. To Karl Lessing

Wolfenbüttel, February 2, 1774

Dear Brother,

Do not expect any excuse for my long silence. You would only hear the same old tune. Better not a single word that could make you anxious or troubled on my account.

I have to answer two or even three of your letters; and if I didn't do so, I might well never receive a fourth. I shall start with the last one, in which you believe me to be buried in—I know not what—work. Your reports about me must not be the most reliable. Compiling a German dictionary—I gave up that silly thought long ago; and I would certainly be least inclined to dig it up again now, since I see it carried out *taliter qualiter* [after a fashion] by someone else. From this *taliter qualiter*, however, you will gather that I am not entirely satisfied with Adelung's work. What I have to criticize in it you shall read at length very soon. For I am indeed minded to have something printed about it, and to attach a small sample of roughly how my work in this field would have looked. That is what has actually been occupying me for some time; and according to my initial estimate, I ought to be finished with it already, were it not absolutely impossible for me to work on the exact same thing without interruption.

The frequent changing of my work is still the only thing that sustains me. To be sure, much is begun and little completed. But what harm is there in that? Even if I completed nothing more in my life—indeed, had never completed anything—would it not amount to the very same thing? Perhaps you will find this mindset a bit misanthropic as well, a trait you suspect me of having regarding religion. But without now investigating how much or how little cause I have to be satisfied with my fellow men, I must nevertheless tell you that you truly form a completely false idea of me in this matter, and misunderstand my entire conduct with respect to Orthodoxy very greatly.

Should I begrudge the world that people seek to enlighten it more? Should I not wish from the bottom of my heart that everyone might think reasonably about religion? I would detest myself if, even in my scribblings, I had any other purpose than to help promote those great aims. But just let me have my own way of how I believe I can do this! And what is simpler than this way?

It is not that I wish to retain the impure water, which has long since been unusable; I simply do not want it dumped out until one knows where to get cleaner water from. I only do not want people to pour it out without a second thought, even if it means bathing the child in manure-slop [*Mistjauche*] afterward. **And what else is our fashionable, modern-day theology compared to orthodoxy, if not slop compared to impure water?**

With orthodoxy, thank God, people were more or less clear on where they stood; a dividing wall had been drawn between it and philosophy, behind which each could pursue its own path without hindering the other. But what are they doing now? They are tearing down this dividing wall, and under the pretext of making us into *reasonable* Christians, they are turning us into *highly unreasonable* philosophers. I ask you, dear brother, do inquire a bit more closely into this point, and look somewhat less at what our new theologians reject than at what they want to put in its place. In this we agree: that our old system of religion is false; but I would not want to say with you that it is a piece of patchwork by bunglers and half-philosophers. I know of nothing in the world on which human acuity has shown and exercised itself more than on this. A patchwork of bunglers and half-philosophers is the system of religion which people now want to put in place of the old one; and with far more influence on reason and philosophy than the old one ever presumed to have. And yet you hold it against me that I defend this old system?

My neighbor's house threatens to collapse on him. If my neighbor wants to tear it down, I will gladly help him. But he does not want to tear it down; rather, he wants to shore it up and underpin it, to the complete

ruin of my own house. He had better refrain from that, or I shall take an interest in his collapsing house as if it were my own.

With these sentiments, you can easily imagine that I am fully prepared for an attack from T*** [Teller]. Just let him come; we shall see who lights the other home! As soon as anything appears, do send it to me. But I think—

This letter had been written up to this point for many days when I received your last one via Mr. Großmann. And in this way I could send you several unfinished letters. So you see quite well that your suspicion—that I had not written to you for so long because I did not want to tell you my candid opinion of your comedies—is completely unfounded. I should think you had proof that I am accustomed not to hold back behind the mountain with you on this point. The matter is quite different, and I must confess the truth to you, even though I well feel that anyone other than my brother might take this confession even worse than a disapproving judgment. I have actually not read your plays yet. If this surprises you too much, I must tell you that I have only read Götz von Berlichingen since yesterday as well, and not even completely.

When I asked you for your plays, I had another little attack of the theater-fever. But it is just as well that these attacks do not last long with me, and usually the utmost disgust for everything that is called theater and theatrical follows for a long time afterward. Meanwhile, I did not want to give your plays to Döbbelin unread either, even though he asked me for them on Großmann's word. You will come soon enough to the dubious honor of being performed by him. Better to let me have them for a little while longer; for I shall certainly read them, and only wish not to read them until I can read such a thing with a calm and cheerful soul.

And from this you see that I at least do not give up the hope of becoming calm and cheerful once again. That is what I can report to you about my condition.

If Ramler's prologue is printed, do send it to me along with the writing

against Wieland. But no, don't send the latter. Send me Badenhaupt's catalog instead. I shall find various old acquaintances among his books that I would like to buy for the library.

Gotthold